

# The Beginners Guide To Keeping Chickens.



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**ChickenCoopsDirect.com**

Written by Mike

Update for 2021

Keeping chickens is simple and rewarding, and you can keep chickens as easily in a town garden as you can in the countryside.

I've been keeping chickens now for some time. I got started because I liked the idea of producing my own fresh organic eggs, and I thought it would be a fun hobby and an interesting addition to my garden.

We also have two young girls (aged 11 and 5) and it's been a great educational experience for them both. Our hens have become much loved pets and the fact that we know where at least some of our food is coming from and that our animals are having a good life is just some of the reasons why in my opinion keeping chickens is so rewarding.

This short guide aims to give you an honest overview of life with chickens, so you can decide for yourself if keeping chickens is right for you. Many delighted chicken owners in the UK think it's more than worthwhile, but read on to see if you agree!

## **A chicken is for life, not just for eggs.**

You will need to care for your chickens every day, just like any other pet (cat, dog, or rabbit).

You cannot just disappear for a week's holiday without organising someone to come and care for the chickens in your absence.

However, you'll be happy to know that chicken care is relatively simple, and neighbours or a friend can often be bribed to keep an eye on them with the promise of some extra fresh eggs should you wish to be away for a while.

Talking of pets, remember that any existing pets you have will suddenly have to share their lives - and garden - with the chickens.

If you already have a cat or dog you can still keep chickens.

If you have cats or dogs, free-range hens may prove a bit of a temptation, but they will probably get used to each other, and if not you will then need to provide a sturdy chicken coop and run space that keep chickens in, and larger furry animals out.

## **What does the law say about keeping chickens at home?**

Well, generally speaking if you are keeping a few hens for eggs then you aren't going to have any problems. (Over 700 000 people in the UK already keep chickens in their gardens.)

However make sure you examine the deeds and any lease for your home - you'll be surprised to find that some expressly forbid the keeping of livestock and chickens. In addition, your local council may have by-laws concerning chickens.

If you are seriously thinking about getting a few hens then it may be best to do a quick check and make a few phone calls just to be on the safe side.

## **Should you tell the neighbours?**

If you mention to your neighbours that you are planning to keep chickens, most will immediately think "Great! Cockerels at 6am in the morning!"

In fact, the vast majority of people keep chickens without a cockerel, as you don't need one for your hens to lay their eggs. And contrary to what some may think having a cockerel around doesn't increase the number of eggs your hens will lay.

Unless you plan on having a large flock (8+) or are keen on actually hatching your own chicks there is very little reason to keep one.

(If you are set on hatching your own chicks then you can quite easily do what our good friends Matt and Joanne did. They simply bought a few fertilized eggs from a local farmer and got one of their more broody hens to sit on and hatch them. No expensive incubators and a great learning experience for their 3 home school daughters!)



## Noise levels?

You may also be concerned about the noise level but these are generally unfounded.

Our hens like most, are really quiet during the day and apart from the usual soft clucking which is barely audible from the bottom of the garden they only make a bit of noise to proudly announce to us that they have laid their egg.

And if you think about it they're a lot quieter than a barking dog, or cat that can keep you up at night with their midnight antics.

# Do you have time to keep chickens?

To be honest, this really boils down to time to check your chickens in the morning before work or the school run and again just before sundown, to put them safely into their coop for the night.

Currently I probably take 5 to 10 minutes on a daily basis to deal with my hens, and this could probably be halved if I invested in an automatic door opener and a larger drinker and feeder.

You will also need to put aside time each week or two to clean out the coop - an undemanding task if you invest in an [easy-to-clean hen house](#) and think of delicious fresh egg omelettes as you do it. We'll talk more about a typical daily routine later in this guide.

## So how many chickens should you start with?

I would suggest that if you are completely new to keeping chickens to start with just two or three hens to begin with and see how you get on. Chickens like to live in groups (birds of a feather and all that) so never keep less than a pair.

If laying properly, three hens will provide a family of four with enough eggs to keep the fridge stocked and the poached eggs flowing, so to speak.



# Just how many eggs can you expect?

According to the International Egg Commission, the UK average egg consumption per person is approximately 180 eggs a year, or just under 3.5 eggs a week. So, on paper a family of four would eat about 12 to 14 eggs a week, which is exactly what you would expect from three happy and well-fed hens. We get this from just two!

You should also know that egg production does vary depending on what breed of chicken you keep. For example, a Light Sussex may lay up to 220 eggs a year, while a showier breed such as the Orpington may only produce 80 eggs a year.

Also, egg production does vary between winter and summer. During the summer months, most hens will lay an egg a day, but in winter, they will lay fewer, and may even stop altogether.

Egg production will also decrease when a hen moults which can happen at any time but is most common at the end of summer. As hens get older, their egg production also slows.

What I have found since keeping chickens is that we seem to get through a lot more eggs at home than we used. Maybe it's because in the past it was just another item on the list to pick up at the supermarket and now it's just a short walk in the garden. And it's a conscious thing; I find myself frying up a quick egg whenever I'm in a rush and feeling a bit peckish.

The girls also bake a lot more, as we don't want to let any extra eggs go to waste!

## **What a typical day to day routine will involve.**

What you will discover once you start to keep chickens is that they are actually very undemanding creatures, and just get on with things.

Initially as with all things new you may well be a little nervous and unsure, but after a few weeks you will fast become an expert in the subject and realise it not much different to keeping a pet dog, cat or rabbit, but with added benefits!

Typically you will need to let your hens out first thing every morning, regardless of how you are feeling, put out their feeder with feed, and fill their water dispensers with fresh, clean water.

Chickens will typically lay in the morning. So if you see them come out to eat and then disappear back into the housing area it's usually to lay an egg.

Ideally you should check and remove any eggs from the nesting boxes as soon as they have laid. This is to prevent accidental damage or one of your hens actually eating the egg. It also lessens the chances of the egg getting muck on it - chickens produce waste as and where they need, which can be in the nesting box too.

That being said many people who keep chickens work and only get back in the evening which is when they collect



their eggs and report that they never have a problem with collecting their eggs at this time.

Your chickens will happily scratch about until sundown, when you should return to collect any new eggs. Make a quick check for any wet or soiled bedding, which should be removed, and then shut your hens away, safe from predators.

Your chicken coop should be cleaned once a week, or twice a month if you only have a few hens. However, I always 'poo pick' in the mornings which simply involves carefully scooping up the poop in the hen house and throwing it on the compost heap - chickens produce a surprising large amount of waste during both the day and night.

I'll tell you which bedding I use that makes this job an absolute breeze and why a little later on.

## **Feeding your hens**

Your chickens can obtain up to 25% of their protein by foraging for grass and insects, and you can add (non-meat) kitchen scraps to their diet for variety. (Things like leftover cooked rice and pasta as well as veggies and fruit can all be given to your hens as treats. Just avoid citrus fruits, or anything that is salty, sugary or fatty.)

Your hens however should always be fed a complete chicken food of either pellets or meal, to keep them in top laying condition. The average hen will eat between 100-150 grams of complete food a day.

So if you start with 3 hens expect to go through a 20 kg bag of layers pellets every 40 to 50 days. That would set you back in the region of about £15 per bag. (You can [buy their feed online - here](#) or from local farmers feed supply store or even high street pet stores.)



Organic layers pellets - the average hen will eat between 100-150 grams a day.

You can also supplement this with around 20 grams of grain or corn per bird per day. But a little tip is to NOT feed them grain and chicken feed mixed together or in the morning.

Like a small child with chocolate chip cookies, the chickens will simply pick out the tasty grain, filling their crops and reducing their intake of the more nutritious complete food.

An unbalanced diet can adversely affect egg production, so grain should be given as a treat, perhaps in the afternoon when the day's supply of fresh shoots and pellets has been eaten.

Having a 'treat bag' of mixed corn is a must. When we first got our girls my daughters were desperate to get them to eat out of their hand and also stroke them, but after almost a week of quietly sitting with them in the run, offering them handfuls of organic pellets they still were wary of us. Then a friend suggested I try using mixed corn and kindly gave me a few huge scoopfuls to take home.

The next time I went down to check on them I sat quietly as always and threw a few small handfuls of the grain near the hens. Their initial reaction was to scatter in all directions (I guess from my sudden hand movement) but it only took a few moments for them to realise that I meant no harm and they pretty much attacked the floor and within seconds had pecked up every last grain.

You'd think they had never been fed! I threw a few more handfuls down, this time a little closer and that too was polished off. The following day, I repeat this process all the while making the distance between them and myself less. On the third day they were eating out of our hands.

It's a great way to get them back into the hen house when necessary or to bribe them to do anything really. So it's your ace up your sleeve!

But just to reiterate - they need to be mainly feed pellets or meal/crumb and the best time to get them to

eat is in the morning. No treats until later in the day.

## **The Importance Of Water**

Water is absolutely essential for your hen's health- an egg is made up of 65% water - so you must give your chickens' access to fresh water.

Unfortunately, you'll soon discover that chickens do not make much of an effort to keep their water supply clean, and will foul it with droppings or dirt they scratch up if it is left at ground level.

Once the water is dirty, they tend not to drink from it, so a solution is to raise the water dish or feeder above ground level and place it near to the entrance to the coop, so they can easily access it.

Some people do this by hanging the drinker and feeder from something so it is at your hens shoulder height - we just use upside down terracotta pots with the drinker and feeder placed on top.

You'll also notice that even if you do this that their water will still get somewhat dirty.

What happens is that when they drink-their beaks get wet. They then peck at something in the soil, go back and have a few more sips to wash whatever it was they managed to get and in the process deposit the soil that stuck to their beak!

So the solution should be to invested in a few plastic gravity feed drinkers which should be scattered about

the garden or run area, so there is always the option of a clean source of water.

Water is critical to the health of your hens and you should know that on a hot day a single hen can drink as much as half a litre!

## **Why You'll Need Grit**

Hens don't have teeth (hence the phrase, rare as hen's teeth), so they ingest grit into their gizzards, where it helps break up their food. (It's the same reason you see birds pecking at the side of roads.) If your chickens don't have access to natural grit in the ground, you should provide some.

Grit with added oyster shell has the benefit of a higher calcium content which helps create stronger egg shells.

You can have some in a small container next to their feeder or you can mix it in with the feed. The hens seem to peck at it as and when they need it.

## **A Bit About Bedding**

Bedding is usually spread on the floor of the chicken coop, where it can absorb moisture, droppings and smells. This layer of bedding also acts as a soft surface for the hens' feet and as insulation in the

winter. Bedding should also be placed in the nesting boxes to protect the eggs and to provide more comfort for the hens.

Good quality bedding should dry quickly too, as wet bedding is a haven for parasites, mould and bacteria, none of which will do your chickens any good. Wood shavings, chopped straw and shredded paper can all be used as chicken bedding.

Wood shavings are popular as it's cheap and helps to reduce the ammonia smell. It provides a soft surface and insulates the hen house well.

However make sure if you decide to use wood shavings as your choice of bedding that it is 'dust free' or 'dust extracted' otherwise it can cause respiratory problems for your hens.

Straw is what I always pictured in nesting boxes but now in my opinion is not as effective as wood shavings. It's not as absorbent as shavings and needs changing more often.

Shredded paper is the cheapest option if you own a shredder and have access to plenty of paper. But it does get soiled very quickly and you will need to change it more frequently.





Hemp which has been cut up and dried is perfect for lining the nestbox.

The bedding I use and recommend hands down is that made from Hemp which has been cut up and dried. It is super absorbent and makes poo picking very easy as it sticks to it and you can simply scoop it up. It's 100% natural material, and composts readily.

It's more expensive than most (it comes in a 20kg bale which will set you back between £12 and £20 depending where you get it.)

However I find that it lasts an age - and probably saves me hours over the course of a month because its super absorbent and it's very easy to work with.

Two brands to look out for are [Aubiose and Hempcore](#).



# Housing Your Hens.

Before you rush out and get hens you need to decide where and how you are going to house them. This will most likely be your biggest outlay of cash so you will want to get it right.

With so many chicken coop suppliers both on and offline it can feel a bit overwhelming when you first start out. Hopefully after this section of the guide you will know what to look for in a chicken coop and what to avoid.

## The Basic Function of a Chicken Coop.

The basic function of a chicken coop is to provide your hens with a place to lay their eggs and a safe and secure place to roost at night. This is all they generally do in the coop - lay eggs and rest safely at night.

Chickens are natural foragers, and from sun up to sun down they will want to be out and about scratching around for food. So they should also have access to well-drained areas for them to scratch about. You will need to make sure that you can provide this for them.

Now I won't lie - chickens left to free range the entire day will have a somewhat negative effect on the aesthetics of your garden. Initially we let ours free range around the garden for most of the day, but after

a few months they had managed to rid it entirely of weeds, which was great but also most of our pretty plants. Even our nice establish lawn started to look a little worse for wear.

I was amazed at just how destructive they can be, digging holes which would put most dogs to shame and 'pruning' a considerable amount of foliage!

Now you might well be having second thoughts with this revelation. "What about my garden, my lawn, my veggie patch?" The fact is you will need to give over a bit of space for your chickens. How you do this is really up to you.

We have [chicken coops](#) available that have extendable runs which in total only take up a few meters of space. These would give you the flexibility of having an all in one designated area for your chickens where they have free access to an enclosed outside area to roam.

That being said I would still recommend letting your hens out late in the afternoon for a change of scene. This allows them an hour or two to peck and scratch around your garden for tasty shoots, grubs or worms.

I recommend the late afternoon because as night approaches they are more open to the idea of going back in their coop, without you working up a sweat trying to persuade them!

# Knowing what to look for in a chicken coop.

There are 7 important questions you should ask yourself when looking at any chicken coop:

## 1. Does the chicken coop have sufficient room for the number of hens you wish to keep?

As you would expect, there are guidelines on the minimum space per bird, which according to DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) is 1 sq foot per bird. The [UK Poultry club](#) which has been around since 1877 also suggests at least 1 square foot per bird (large fowl) or 8" square for bantams.

However, that is a MINIMUM, and what you will find from the many people already keeping hens is that the more room you can give your chickens, the healthier and happier they will be.

If you allow your hens to free range during the day and you only lock them up in their house at night then you can quite easily get away with a the smaller amount of housing space set out by DEFRA.

But while hens will perch close together at night bear in mind that keeping too many hens in a coop could result in health problems as well as a lot more cleaning!

A trick when assessing a chicken coop whether online or in a shop is to find out what the internal measurements of the sleeping/roosting area of the coop are in square feet and remember to allow at least 1 sq foot per bird.

What you should know is that some suppliers inflate the amount of hens their coops can hold. I would be wary of people selling £90 coops that can hold 8 hens. When you look closely you see that they are also taking into account the nesting box space and you find that the 'hens' are actually bantams! Work out the internal space yourself and make up your own mind based on common sense and the 1sq foot rule as the minimum.

(To get the area: multiply the length and width. If the measurements are in cm, do the same to calculate the square centimetres and then visit a site like this to work out the amount of square foot space your hens will have.)

It's important that your hens have space to roam, however if your hens are not to be totally free-range, (sometimes it is not practical in a suburban garden), you could invest in a chicken coop with a run.

As a general rule of thumb the more space you give them the happier they will be. Cramped conditions leads to boredom, pecking and an increased likelihood of pests and diseases.

Most of our coops come with runs that can be extended to allow you to give your birds more space should you need it. If you are going to keep your chickens in a run for most of the time then as a rule of thumb you should allow around 1 square meter of run space for each bird.

If you do plan on keeping your hens permanently in an enclosed run then you should expect the grass in that area to soon wear thin and turn in to a bit of a quagmire when it rains.

Because of this some people prefer to keep their coop and run on a hard standing. This has the advantage of there being a little less mud about when it rains; it can be sprayed down and cleaned regularly with a hose or high pressure cleaner and there is also less chance of a determined fox tunnelling in under the run.

It does however create a bit of an unnatural environment for them. So if you do go down this route then you will need to give your hens a really good layer of bark to allow them to act naturally and scratch about in.

This would need to be regularly raked out and replenished. There is also the option of using rubber chippings which are more expensive initially but can be washed and disinfected and generally last longer.

Your hens will also need access to a dry area of soil for them to take regular dust baths. Hens will need and want to take a regular dust bath to rid their feathers of parasites and insects.

If they don't have access to an area of dry soil then you should provide them with some. This can be done by filling a deep [cat litter tray](#) or a large pot with soil and sand. If allowed to free range they would typically find a secluded spot in the garden to dig their dust bath.

Free range birds have plenty to keep them occupied but hens housed permanently in a run will need things to keep them entertained. They like to have different

levels of height to clamber on to and perch on, some people hang CDs in the run which give them something to peck at. You can also push leafy greens through the chicken wire for them to eat.

You could also consider using a poultry electric netting kit to provide a safe and secure area for you hens to roam but you will need to consider if you have the space and budget (£150 to £200) for one of them.

Before you begin researching which coop would best suit your needs knowing whether you intend to keep them full time in a coop and run or whether you intend to allow your hens the freedom to free range will help narrow down the search.

When we started out we allowed our hens' full access to our garden but later decided it was a better idea to fence off a small unproductive section of our veggie patch where they go do as they please without us worrying if they were eating the sweet peas or digging up the lawn.



We still let them out in the late afternoon to roam about the rest of our garden. This way they help keep the weeds down, they get to explore a bit and have a change of scene and our garden just about survives.

If you do decide to fence off an area of your back garden for your chicken then keep in mind that you will need to take steps to ensure foxes can't access their run by simply climbing over or tunnelling under.

Just as we enjoy chickens and eggs as a tasty meal, so, unfortunately, do predators such as foxes. Moving on....

## **2. Will it be easy to clean and collect eggs?**

As you collect eggs nearly every day, it makes sense to choose a chicken coop that offers an easy way to access those eggs, with the minimum disturbance to your hens. Also, your hen house will need regular cleaning to keep your chickens in good condition, so ease of cleaning should be a major consideration.

Look for hen houses that have easy access to the nesting area as well as pull out trays and removable perches. Regular cleaning will not only avoid the build-up of droppings but also reduces the opportunities for pests and diseases to take hold. A weekly clean should only take around 15 minutes in a well-made and maintained hen house.



### **3. Is it well ventilated?**

This is an important point you may not realize but the air inside a chicken coop can quickly become toxic due the high level of ammonia given off by the chicken's droppings.

Inadequate ventilation can lead to respiratory problems in your hens, so it is important to keep fresh air circulating.

You may have also heard that chickens do not tolerate draughts, and that the ventilation must be such that there are no draughts. In my experience chickens are hardy, and well insulated from the elements, and as long as they don't have a continuous blast of cold air in their faces then air circulation inside the coop is actually a good thing.

We have designed our coops so that the ventilation holes are near the top of the coop. This way it allows for the toxic air to escape without your chickens being in a draughts.

### **4. Will the coop keep your hens safe from predators and does it provide adequate protection from the elements?**

Your chicken coop must be secure against predators including foxes and to a lesser extent rats. A housing area that is raised off the ground offers better protection from predators trying to dig their way in.

Also get into a habit of checking your coop and run when you collect your eggs, for any signs of damage or gnawing. Both of these are signs of potential predators trying to get in.

Your hen house should also be weatherproofed sufficiently for the UK weather, and if you invest in a wooden coop then you should consider treating it with [animal-friendly preservatives](#), ideally once a year.

## **5. Are the perches correctly made?**

At night, hens like to perch as high above the ground as they can, as this gives them a sense of safety from predators. Perches made from plastic or metal piping are not suitable for chickens, as they cannot grip the perch properly.

In fact, chickens prefer to perch on a flat surface with gently curving edges so their feet are protected as they grip onto it. So the perch should be about 3 to 4 cm wide, with curved edges. So often we see coops being sold online with perches that are not correctly made.

When assessing a hen house take close look at the perches. They should be wide, flat and rounded off along the top edges.



You should also be able to remove your perches for cleaning, and they should be positioned well away from food or water, as chicken can create over 50% of their droppings during the night.

## 6. The Nesting Area

Hens will always seek out dark, quiet and secluded places to lay their eggs. By providing suitable nesting boxes within the coop, you can provide your hens with their ideal laying environment, and a space where you know their eggs will be clean and protected - and easy to find!

Hen houses that have the nesting box protruding at the side and access via a nesting box lid allows you to easily collect your eggs with minimal disturbance to the hen house as a whole.



Hens like a quiet cosy place to lay and they don't mind sharing

You'll find they don't need much space to lay their eggs, quite often we find two hens squashed together inside one tiny compartment of the nesting box even though the other 2 areas are completely free! Up to three hens will share one nesting area happily, but if you have three hens; two boxes or areas to lay will give them more options.

Nest boxes should be lined with soft dry bedding material and raised from the ground. If the nesting boxes are positioned higher than the perches what tends to happen is your hens will sleep in their nesting box because it's the highest place.

This isn't a problem as such but what you will find is they will foul their laying area (hens produce a large amount of their droppings at night) and then quite happily lay right on top of it! So if you want clean eggs look for a coop which has the perches high up.

We have specifically designed all our wooden coops so that the perches are either in line or higher than the bottom of the nesting box so there is less chance of this happening.

## **7. Design and aesthetics – does it look good and will it last!**



The beautifully made Devon Hen House by ChickenCoopsDirect.com

Your [chicken coop](#) sits in your garden 365 days a year, so it should be something you are pleased to look at, not an eyesore.

More importantly you should ask yourself will it last. There are plenty of chicken coops for sale out there for a [£150 or slightly more](#) and on the face of it they look like great value for money.



But what you'll find is that the wood is thinner and the supplier has cut every corner to get the lowest possible price and you could well end up wasting your time and money.

Obviously budget is a determining factor in your decision when purchasing a chicken coop. But personal experience has taught me that buying the cheapest of anything (especially something that will be outside in the elements) is more often than not false economy.

Instead by investing a little bit more I have often found less frustrations and problems, better customer service and generally a much better product.

## **Predators – what you need to know.**

Where there are chickens, there will most likely be foxes. Now that urban foxes are as numerous as their country cousins, they are a major consideration for the urban chicken owner.



Your chicken coop must be both secure and robust enough to resist a determined attack by a fox armed with sharp teeth and claws. Despite popular belief, foxes can attack during the day as well as at night, so if you live in an area where foxes are found, only let your chickens out loose in the garden if you are there with them, or you run the risk of losing one.

The best protection against a fox attack is to return your hens at night to a secure, sturdy and robust hen house. Foxes are also highly effective diggers, so they can easily tunnel under a coop wall and into the run. So it is a very wise idea to lock your hens up at night inside the actual housing area of the coop.

Another way to prevent a fox from digging under the coop is to lay a line of pavers or bricks around the outside of the run. A fox will soon get tired of digging in from a half a metre out and will probably move on to find an easier meal.

Some say that human smell around the chicken coop discourages foxes, and we have read that urinating along the perimeter of your chicken run will mark it as 'your' territory, and discourage foxes. Not sure what the neighbours will think, but it's a theory... ;)

Remember to always inspect your chicken coop for signs of scratching or teeth marks, and make any repairs quickly to prevent a small hole becoming larger.

For a detailed section on foxes and the steps you can take to keep your hens safe visit this [link here](#).

You should also know that keeping chickens can increase the likelihood of rats, mice and other vermin. The problem isn't so much that hens attract the vermin but



rather that they are attracted by leftover chicken feed and the chance of an easy meal.

Rats are most likely to come and visit the chicken coop during the winter, when other food is scarce. Rats rarely attack chickens as such, but they will take eggs given half a chance.

Mice and small vermin are less of a problem because they are often seen as a meal by most chickens, so they tend to stay away or their numbers kept low, if you know what I mean.

Rats are opportunists who love a free meal, so the best way to discourage rats is to keep your chicken coop clean and free from surplus food. Also pay close attention to where you store your chicken feed. Simply putting it high on a shelf won't discourage mice or rats; keep your feed in a [container with a secure lid](#), such as a large [galvanized dustbin](#).

If you develop a major problem with rats, your local authority should be able to help you deal with it, as rats are classed as vermin.

# The Most Common Pests And Problems

Chickens, like humans, can get sick with anything from a common cold to more serious diseases. How can you spot the early symptoms, and ensure your flock remains fit and healthy?

Read on to discover the most common chicken ailments, and how you can help treat or prevent them.

And remember, if you are in any doubt as to why your chicken is ill; isolate it from your flock until you know what is wrong with it.



**Prevention is the key** to keeping your chickens healthy. You will prevent a host of problems that can plague other chicken-keeping enthusiasts, simply by knowing what to look out for and by keeping an eye on their welfare.

Like any animals, your chicken can be susceptible to a number of pests, diseases, and disorders.

Here is a quick 6 point check list of what a healthy chicken should look like.

## **1. Eyes**

Your chicken's eyes should be bright, clear and with that slightly naughty glint that means they are full of vitality.

## **2. Nostrils**

Just like humans, chickens catch colds, so nostrils should be clear of discharge. Also check for beak deformities.

## **3. Feathers**

One of the surest signs that a chicken is unwell is that they lose feather condition. Plumage should be clean, sleek and well-groomed (by the chicken). HOWEVER, chickens do moult, and during their moult they look very tatty indeed.

It's common for chickens to shed some feathers in late Summer or early Autumn.



When checking your chicken, you need to pick it up and gently pull the feathers back to reveal the roots, where parasite can lurk. Check under the wing too.

## 4. Vent

It should be clean, free of dirt and parasites, slightly moist, but not giving any discharge. Droppings should be firm and greyish-brown, with a white cap. Don't be too squeamish about this process; you can tell a lot about a chicken's health from its vent.



## 5. Legs

Chickens' legs are naturally scaly, but should be smooth and blemish-free. Rough scales may indicate parasites.



A chicken's comb should have good, strong colour and be free of scabs.

## 6. Comb

Your chicken's comb should have good, strong colour and be free of scabs. It is susceptible to frostbite, so apply a layer of Vaseline to protect them on very cold winter nights.

# Keeping your coop clean

Cleaning your chicken coop must become a regular part of your life, not something you remember to do now and again.

Dirty unkempt living quarters is where a lot of your problems can begin, so this is why it is probably **one of the most important things you can do** to prevent infestations and diseases.

Effective cleaning cannot happen while your hens are resident, so temporarily evict them into their outside pen with a tasty treat or two, while you get on with the cleaning.

Bedding must be changed regularly, particularly if it gets damp. Make sure you remove all bedding, even from the corners, and wash and scrub away any that sticks in place. Allow the coop floor to dry if necessary before putting in new bedding.

Roosting areas should be cleaned and disinfected regularly, especially under the perches themselves, where parasites and insects can lurk.

Water dispensers and feeding dishes should be scrubbed clean, rinsed thoroughly and dried before returning to use.

I used and [recommend this disinfectant](#) every time I do a deep clean of my coop

# Watch Out For Mites



An extreme close up of red mites, typically they are less than 1mm in size.

Red mites hide away in the dark corners of the chicken coop, emerging at night to feed on the blood of your poor unsuspecting chickens.

The level of irritation from a red mite infestation can cause broody hens to abandon their nests and pluck out their own feathers. Other symptoms include weight loss and a general loss of condition and lower egg yield.

Since they feed at night, they are notoriously difficult to spot during the daytime. Birds will be restless at night and will have a severe skin irritation from the biting mites.

Red mites are almost white before they feed blood red after a feed and a greyish black colour with partially



digested blood so you will see various colours of mites.

To test for red mite you can simply wipe a white piece of kitchen towel or a white tissue along the underside of a perch in the dark. Any blood stains will indicate the presence of red mite!

**Prevention is the easiest way to deal with mite.** When you get started with keeping chickens more than likely you will have a new mite-free coop. Make sure to give this a real good dusting of red mite powder before you put your chickens in. Aim to leave a noticeable layer of the powder in the corners and cracks of the coop.

As soon as you can handle you hens comfortable dust them too with mite powder, making sure to work the powder in under their feathers.

By doing this and then repeating it every **4 to 6 weeks** you greatly reduce the chances of red mite taking hold. To date we have never experienced a red mite problem because we follow this method.

If at a later stage you introduce a new bird to the flock make sure that they are very well dusted down with mite powder.

There is a whole host of products [available to you here](#).

The main ingredient in these powders is D.E (**Diatomaceous earth**) which is a 100% natural and non-toxic powder that typically provides protection for up to 6 weeks with just one application.

# Lice

Lice are extremely irritating for your chickens, and a severe infestation can also kill small chicks.

Lice are just big enough to be spotted with the naked eye as pale insects on the skin. When you examine your chicken's feathers, you might spot them crawling around the base of the feathers, and you may see clusters of their eggs on the feather stems. Lice love somewhere soft and warm, so also check under the wings and around the vent area.

Other symptoms include a dirty vent area, weight loss and reduced egg yield.

Lice should be treated using a specialist lice powders for chickens, and always apply it exactly as per the instructions. Apply the powder to EVERY bird in your flock, infected or not.

Lice can survive for up to 5 days without a host bird to feed on, and can reproduce in just 3 weeks. What's more their eggs are resistant to the powders, so repeat the lice powder treatment in 7-10 days to kill off the next louse generation before they can breed again.

You must also clean out all bedding and dispose of it well away from the chicken coop. Then, properly clean and disinfect the chicken coop including under the perches, before filling it with fresh bedding, and returning your birds.

Chickens naturally rid themselves of lice by taking a dust bath. If your chickens do not have access to

natural soil, provide them with a [box filled](#) with dry soil or sand.

If your chickens do have a lice infestation, remember to replace the dust bath contents with fresh materials, and add a dash of lice powder just to be on the safe side.

## Scaly Leg

Scaly leg is caused by a mite that burrows under the scales of your chicken's legs. Symptoms include leg inflammation, swelling and lameness. If left untreated, the condition gets worse, as the scales get pushed away from the skin by the mites' excretions.



If your chicken has scaly leg, you must isolate the affected bird(s) as scaly leg is extremely contagious.

Most vets will advise regular, gentle washing of the legs to remove the surface layer, and then an application of a suitable treatment to allow the leg to heal. Some chicken keepers dip the affected legs into surgical spirit twice a week to keep the legs clean and disinfected.

NEVER try to lift or remove any affected scales; this is very painful for your chicken and unnecessary, as the damaged scales are replaced during the chicken's annual moult.

As with all mite infections, you must also clean out and disinfect your chicken coop. Check for any damp patches; scale mites love damp conditions.

Chickens with feathered feet are particularly prone to scaly leg, so remember to check their legs regularly.

## Worms – More Common Than You Think

Worms are endoparasites, which mean they live inside their host, so they are not possible to spot by eye. The usual external symptoms of worms are loss of appetite and weight, lower egg production, faded comb colour and liquid droppings.

Unfortunately many health problems that your birds have can be related to worms of some sort and it is **important to de-worm your birds regularly** as well as make sure your hen houses and runs are well maintained.

Failure to treat a hen with worms will certainly cost you in the long run with increased feed costs, less eggs and a sick or unhealthy bird.

If you suspect your chicken has worms then the product recommended most by our customers and other chicken keeping folk as a last resort is **Flubenvet**.

None of us want to use chemical wormers for worming chickens unless it is really necessary, but Flubenvet seems to be the best product on the market for serious infestations.

What a lot of people do and it's the approach we recommend you take with your own birds is to consider using a herbal product like [Verm-X](#) on a monthly basis and only use a chemical wormer if your hens get a serious case of worms.

## Sneezing and Colds

Chickens with a cold will have drippy nostrils and appear a little out of sorts. Many chicken owners swear by feeding their chickens garlic to keep colds at bay, either in their feed or in their water, although there is no definitive proof this actually works.

Since colds are usually associated with damp and cold living conditions, keep your chicken coop clean and dry, and don't worry about the odd sneeze now and then.

# Vitamins and Tonics

From time to time your flock could benefit from a 'pick me up'. There will be times when either your chickens are unwell or needing that extra boost of vitamins.

So it is not a bad idea to consider having some sort of tonic or vitamin supplement handy which you can either add to your chickens feed or water supply.

Many people like to give their hens a boost of vitamins during times when they are a bit worse for wear e.g when they catch a cold or during their annual moult. Others prefer to do it on a regular basis to ensure that your chickens are always in top condition

## How to keep your hens healthy.

Generally speaking prevention is the key to keeping your chickens healthy. Cleaning your chicken coop must become a regular part of your life, not something you remember to do every now and then.

Dirty unkempt living quarters is where a lot of your problems can begin, so this is why it is probably one of the most important things you can do to prevent infestations and diseases.



# Finding Chickens For Sale

You also have to locate a suitable source of chickens. This can prove a bit of a challenge.

You can get your hens from a local breeder or farmer. Try speaking with people at a farmers market, check the local newspaper, and go online.

You could also take a stroll around your local village mid-morning and listen carefully for the sounds of hens.

Many hens lay mid-morning and often announce to the world that they have laid with louder than normal clucking.

You may think that's a bit of a silly idea but I did just that one morning and discovered that our neighbour 3 doors down kept chickens, the gentlemen across the road did too, and about 3 other people on my block!

If you do find someone in your neighbourhood is keeping chickens have a chat with them and see if they can help you.

## Buying Chickens

Now before you rush out to purchase new occupants for your coop, here are a few tips on buying chickens.

### **1. Always buy your chickens in person.**

When buying chickens, you need to see what you are getting. Some companies will deliver them, but most

reputable breeders operate a collection-only policy, and with good reason. By buying in person, you can see the condition of your birds, how they are kept, and reject any that are obviously sickly, ill or not as described. If in any doubt, walk away - there are always other chickens.

## **2. Buy in the light.**

Buy your chickens in daylight, when you can properly see their condition. A healthy hen should be alert, active and bright-eyed during the day. Feathers should be glossy and complete, but this may not be the case if the hen is in moult, or is at the bottom of the pecking order. If so, she will grow new feathers once she is in your tender loving care.

## **3. Pick up your chicken.**

There is no substitute for picking up a chicken and feeling her condition for yourself. Look for smooth legs, good feather condition.

Check to see that the bone going down the centre of the bird is well padded with flesh either side. If it protrudes, it means your hen is thin and can denote problems. A firm body indicates good muscle and meat development.

Gently part the feathers for a quick inspection for lice or skin conditions hidden below.

#### 4. Check their comb.

The comb sits on top of the hen's head and should be red, plump and glossy (this often denotes she's in lay). If it's pale, but plump it probably means she's healthy but off lay. If it becomes dry, shrivelled or flaky; then that's an indicator of poor health.

#### 5. The vent

It should be clean, if it's a round 'hole' it means she's off lay, if it's elongated (like a slot) it means she's in lay! If it's dirty your hen may have an upset tummy or an infection.

#### 6. The crop

Situated at the bottom of her neck, the crop should fill up when she eats and slowly deflate as she passes the food through to her stomach.

It should be neither too packed solid with food (that can indicate an impacted crop) nor full of fluid (that can point to sour crop which smells foul too).

#### 7. The bird's demeanour

A healthy hen should be busy and active, feeding and drinking well, preening and scratching.

A poorly hen will **stand hunched** and disinterested in her surroundings, (although sometimes **wet or cold weather** makes them hunch.)



A sure sign a hen is sick - standing still, hunched up sometimes with their eyes closed.

Ultimately trust your instincts; if you like the bird - buy it. If it (literally) feels wrong, walk away from the deal, or choose another chicken.

### **Should Your Hens Be Vaccinated?**

Good questions! This is the answer I got from a vet that keep chickens.

*"The trouble with poultry vaccinations is that they generally come in batches of 250 or 1000 doses, so it's basically impossible to get back garden bred birds*

*vaccinated - so they will only be done if you get them from a big commercial breeder.*

*Not many of the diseases they can be vaccinated against are of concern to human health (except salmonella), so the main reason for doing them is for commercial flocks so they don't lose lots of birds suddenly. For back garden birds, worms and mites etc are more likely everyday problems"*

So it's really down to you and the person selling you your hens. If they have been vaccinated then that's an added bonus.

## **Collecting Your Hens**

Once you have located a source it might be worth a reconnaissance run. That's what I did and it gave me time to wrap my head around the fact that "we were actually going to do this thing". You can ask questions, check over the birds in general and then make a decision.

Once you do you'll need to arrange to bring them home. For this you are going to need something to transport them in. This could be a large cardboard box, a cat carrier or something similar. They don't need a massive amount of space but they do need good ventilation.





Collecting our x-Bats

It can be a rather traumatic experience for the birds being packed into a box so you'll want to drive calmly and not break suddenly or cause any further undue stress for your birds. Make sure to cut decent sized holes in the box sides to allow them a fresh flow of air.

Also remember in summer the inside of a car can get really hot and **extreme temperatures are detrimental to hens.**

## Letting Them Loose

Once you get home carefully place the container/carrier with the birds inside the run and let them out in a calm manor. Make sure they have access to clean water



and feed - if they are still very young or x bats this will probably be layers mash.

By now you will be excited and nervous at the same time, your birds will probably be just nervous! So leave them to it. Stay calm and try not to make any sudden movements. It's probably best you just **keep your distance for a little while.**

With 2 eager kids in tow it was a bit of a challenge but I had warned them in advance that "their pets" would need a bit of time to adjust.

You'll find that they may well be a bit coy at first but will soon start to explore their surrounding and start scratching about and pecking at things. For the 1st couple of days just let them be. Just make sure they have **easy access to food and water at all times** during the day.

## Getting Them To Bed

Getting them back in the coop the 1st couple of times can be a challenge. For us it was almost comical!

It was midsummer and even though it was bed time for my daughters our new arrivals certainly weren't yet ready. I guess they were thinking the sun is still up so why must we go to bed!

I ended up running in circles trying to get the birds to go inside the coop. All we achieved were laps around the hen house. Every time I approached them they were off.

So it may well be a two man job initially depending on your setup.

I let them calm down for a while and tried again. This time I got my wife to block off one side of their escape route and I approached from the other - slowly and calmly. This left them only one place to go - the large open door to the coop which they promptly entered.

What you will soon discover and something I didn't realise at the time was when it starts to get dark they go to bed by themselves, its inborn, and **trying to get them in earlier than they are ready to go** I think probably isn't fair.

Besides they need daylight to enhance their laying capabilities, so presumably, the more daylight they have, the better. If it's necessary to get them inside earlier for whatever reason, then **try to coax them with some corn.**

After they are in then make sure everything is locked and leave them be. It could take a couple of days or even a few weeks for them to get into a routine. But as they get used to their new surroundings and you, they quickly learn.

Our hens put themselves to bed now. We see them start to head in the direction of the hen house and we know it's time to come out and lock up.

# How To Pick Up And Hold A Chicken Correctly

Knowing how to pick up and hold your hens correctly is something you are going to need to learn to do.

You will handle your chickens quite a lot - to check for mites which should be done regularly; to clip their wings (done once a year) or just to give them a cuddle.

Making sure you hold them correctly is important. Take a look at the [video here](#).

## How To Clip Your Chicken Wings

Clipping the wing of a hen is the most common and easiest method of controlling their flight.

It simply involves using a SHARP pair of scissors and cutting off the first ten flight feathers of one wing.

If done correctly wing clipping doesn't hurt the bird at all. It's not even noticeable when they are walking around as the primary flying feathers are hidden underneath when the wings are folded.

You only clip 1 wing as this causes your bird to lack the balance needed for flight. You will need to repeat this after each molt as new feathers will grow to replace the ones you have cut off.

It may be easier to have someone help you especially if this is your first time. All you need to do is pick up your hen and carefully spread one wing so the primary flight feathers are clearly visible. Then with a sharp pair of scissors cut above the line of smaller feathers.

Take a look at [this video](#)

## Choosing The Breed Of Chicken That Is Right For You

If you are completely new to keeping chickens you may be surprised to know that there are hundreds of breeds to choose from.



If you are like the majority of our customers then one of the main reasons you are keeping chickens is for egg laying. You may also intend to keep them for their meat, or maybe you like the idea of simply keeping chickens as pets, and any eggs that come your way is purely a bonus!

## **Your choice of chicken breed depends on why you want to keep chickens, whether for:**

- Eggs and meat
- As family pets
- For showing and exhibitions





When considering breeds of chickens for meat, eggs or both, you basically have three choices:

## 1. Laying Breeds

Laying breeds are the best choice if you want eggs above all else. A typical egg laying breed chicken can produce between 180-240 eggs per year per hen. Three hens can therefore produce up to 720 eggs a year, or an average of just under 2 eggs a day.

Your laying hen should start laying eggs at around 5-6 months old, and she will continue to lay at a steady rate for several years. As your hen ages, egg production will slow, as the hen becomes older and 'spent'.

Laying breeds expend most of their energy during their lives to laying eggs, so spent hens are usually skinny with little real meat on their bones.

However, by choosing a dual purpose breed, you can get good egg production and a fine eating bird too.

## 2. Meat Breeds

Meat breed chickens are bred for their suitability for the table. If you buy these breeds of chickens, be prepared that they grow very fast, as the faster they grow, the more tender their meat is. Certain meat breed chickens can reach eating weight within just 6 or 7 weeks.



There are three main types of chickens you can raise for meat, known as:

- **broilers** - butchered at between 3-5lbs in weight
- **fryers** - butchered at between 3-5lbs in weight
- **roaster** - butchered at between 6-8lbs in weight

### 3. Dual Purpose Breeds

If you want both eggs and meat from your chickens, dual purpose chicken breeds are a great choice for the home chicken owner. Dual purpose breed chickens lay a steady supply of eggs whilst building a decent amount of meat on their bones.

As you might expect, there is some variations between breeds, as some produce more meat than eggs, others the reverse. So, you really can choose the best breed for your family's needs.

## Keeping Chickens As Pets

Chickens can make superb pets for children and adults alike, as they can be affectionate, friendly and some of our customers tell us they even come to them when called. In our breed pages that follow, we have described the best breeds for keeping as pets, and it rather depends on the size of your garden and your children, and how many eggs you wish, as to which breed you choose.

Remember, if you want to keep chickens either as pets or for their meat and eggs, they require proper care just like any other domestic animal. You will need to let them in and out every day, provide them with fresh

water, clean bedding and high quality feed, clean their coop out regularly, and inspect them for signs of disease or parasites. When you go on holiday, you will need someone to take over these duties too.

## Understanding Chicken Breed Jargon

It has to be said, keeping chickens is a remarkably jargon-free hobby, but there are a few definitions that'll help you when you are choosing your chicken breeds for the first time.

Chickens come in two main types, bantams and large. Large breeds are on average 20-25% bigger than bantams.

Bantams are divided into classes according to their *distinctive features*, such as whether they have leg feathers or not. Being smaller than large chickens, they are particularly suitable for keeping in your back garden, and they make great pets for young children. The downside is that their eggs are smaller; the plus side is they scratch about less than their bigger cousins, so you'll have more lawn left.

Large chickens tend to be in classes according to their *original place of origin*, such as English, American, Asiatic or Oriental.

Within these classes, chicken varieties are defined by other distinctive features, such as feather colouring or comb style (and a whole lot of other stuff that you only need to know if you want to show chickens or become a chicken breeder.)

# Breeds of Chicken

OK, two more important bits of chicken jargon to go; **pure breeds** and **hybrid breeds**.

Pure breed chickens are the pedigree chicken breeds, often with flamboyant feathers, striking good looks and an attitude to match. Their breed standards are written down and approved by national organizations, just like pedigree dogs or cats. Pure breed chickens usually don't lay as many eggs as hybrid breeds, and are generally less docile. As a result, some older, traditional breeds have fallen out of favour, and are quite rare.

As their names suggests, hybrid breeds have been developed by crossing two or more pure breeds to create a chicken that fulfils a particular function, such as providing more eggs, or more breast meat. They may not be as good-looking as the pure breeds, but are often more suitable for your first-time chicken adventure.

## Understanding The Chicken Pecking Order

Hens establishing a pecking order can be quite disturbing to witness, but it is actually a good thing because once established it brings order to the flock.



Conflict within the flock is reduced because each hen knows its place in the hierarchy. When food is available there are no fights to get to it first, because the pecking order dictates who gets access when, the lesser give way to the more dominant in the group.

The top hen gets to have first access to food, water and choice of where to roost, etc, and the others each have their place in the pecking order, all the way down to the bird at the bottom which will usually be the last to have access to the food or choice in anything.

The dominant hen establishes her position at the top by bullying the others and at times can be quite vicious. There are various tactics she can use, most commonly blocking other birds from access to the food and water, and pecking them.



Other methods involve jumping on their back and pushing to the ground, sitting on them when roosting, chasing, rushing at or just giving them a warning look. She basically makes life unpleasant for them until they defer to her. This process usually takes a couple of days but at times can last up to a couple of weeks.





Do not interfere in this process, because it is **quite natural and normal** for it to happen. Just watch for any signs of a hen being pecked to the point where blood is drawn. Chickens can't resist pecking at an open wound and **will be drawn** to the **injured hen**, pecking at the wound and making it worse. They are actually capable of pecking another hen to death. The injured hen should be separated from the group until she has healed.

If a hen is particularly aggressive, try isolating her from the group for a while but still within their view. This will have the effect of bumping her down the pecking order and on her reintroduction to the group she should settle in to her new position.

Once the order is established it will generally stay that way because chickens lower in the order are too scared to challenge a chicken higher up.



I hope you found my emails and this guide enjoyable and useful.

If you've taken the plunge and decided to keep chickens then good for you! You've joined hundreds of thousands of people who enjoy fresh eggs every day!

If you purchased a coop/run from us then keep an eye out for our follow-up emails full of advice.

Perhaps you've not yet decided to keep chickens or have decided that it's not for you - if that's the case then be sure to bookmark our website [www.chickencoopsdirect.com](http://www.chickencoopsdirect.com) and I hope that you'll think of us if you change your mind.

Thanks again for your time.

All the best.

Mike

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